

Patrick Hill

THE RELIANCE, LONDON, UK



For many years now the Lyle's Golden Syrup tin has born the same bizarre emblem: a dead lion, from whose slashed belly rises a buzzing cloud of bees. Beneath this run the words 'from strength, sweetness', as though to imply that the tin's gloopy contents were derived, via some ineffable insect activity, from the fallen big cat. I'm not sure if the Los Angeles-based sculptor Patrick Hill has encountered this particular product (it's hard to imagine something so British being stocked by California's corner stores), but its packaging speaks of many of the concerns of 'Golden Syrup', his first UK solo show.

Like the image of the dead lion, the three works at The Reliance are preoccupied with penetration, fecundity and fading strength, but also, like the grouping and regrouping bees, with the fugitiveness of form. If we visualize the viscous substance inside the Lyle's tin (and the relationship between a container and its contents, a body and its various liquids, is key to Hill's work), we discover another vital set of co-ordinates. Golden syrup recalls the slow pour of a Hollywood sun, but also the fluids expended in the porn studios of the San Fernando Valley. To the taste, this amber substance is actually sweeter than sugar – the saccharine equivalent of free-base cocaine.

At first glance such concerns (or associations, or atmospheres) feel very far from the abstract formalism of Hill's work, but the more one looks at it, the more apparent they become. Take his *Flower Pictures* (all works 2006), which comprise a horizontal letter 'X', three of whose wooden limbs are bisected by vertical panes of glass: one rectangular, one circular and one square. The first of these is partly sheathed in bleach-spattered pink canvas, the second unadorned, and the third penetrated by a brass rod, on which hangs further swatches of yellow, black and pink canvas flecked with molasses and olive oil, their abused fabric resembling wilted flowers, abandoned bath towels or labia. Set into the wood at acute angles, the glass panels catch the sculpture's own reflection, so that, as one moves around it, its opaque parts are momentarily doubled, or extended, before disappearing again. In this hall of mirrors the regular cross of the wooden 'X' is transformed into a crucifix, and its heavy, three-dimensional limbs transformed into flat planes of coloured light. This is sculpture visited by ontological uncertainty, sculpture without fixed boundaries, sculpture that (like our endlessly excreting bodies) isn't able to contain itself.

If glass allows Hill's work to further penetrate space, and if we interpret this as a kind of sculptural priapism, what are we to make of his use of translucent oil, glass' liquid twin? In his *Nectar*, two pink lengths of wood form an 'L', adorned on the horizontal with a circular pane of glass clothed in an inverted 'V'-shaped canvas sleeve, and on the vertical with another brass rod. Over this was draped a length of yellow cloth so saturated with oil that the surplus had begun to pool on the gallery floor. Another mirror then, another reflective surface, but one that had exchanged the solidity and sharp angles of glass for fluid indeterminacy. Looking at the piece, it was hard not to read *Nectar's* droopy, dripping fabric as a post-coital penis – sticky, spent and somehow very vulnerable. Taken together with the circular pane of glass (whose canvas covering suggested a schematic vagina, or a sheared plot of pubic hair), the puddle of oil prompted thoughts about containment and spillage, resistance and give, and the way our human desires, shapes and spendings throw the notion of a truly 'abstract' sculpture into doubt.

The third work in Hill's show, *Voyeur*, is composed of two square wooden blocks partially frocked in fleshy, bleach-marbled canvas, into which are set two round glass panels, stuck through with a single brass dowel. Of all the pieces included, this perhaps most clearly underlined the fact that these are sculptures not only to look at but also to look through. Its circular forms might be proxy suns, but they could also be read as orifices, or as eyes, lenses or looking glasses. As with *Flower Pictures* and *Nectar*, to glimpse *Voyeur*, to pace around it, was to bring its phantom parts into being. To turn away from it was to cause it to detumescere. Left alone, Hill's sculptures are continent, monkish things. It's when we rub up against them that they begin to bulge, and seep.

Tom Morton